

Alfonso X “The Wise”: The Last Almohad Caliph?

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Abstract

When dealing with the prolific intellectual output during the reign of Alfonso X, known to be indebted to Arabic sources, hardly any reference is made to the Almohad context. It is particularly striking that Almohad culture is even ignored when referring to the influence of Averroism. It was in fact the Almohad caliphs who encouraged the development of Aristotelian philosophy, which interest in philosophy and knowledge formed part of the “sapientalist” concept of the Almohad caliphate itself. The present essay discusses this often-disregarded “sapientalism,” insisting on its connection with Alfonso X, continuing the line of inquiry begun by Ana M. Montero. This study describes what was involved in the political and cultural project of the Almohads, in order to show the parallels with the political and cultural project of Alfonso X.

Keywords

Almohads, political and cultural project, Alfonso X, sapientalism, knowledge, cultural transfer

Following the line which some have called of the *Banū Codera* (Marín, “Arabistas en España”; Monroe), traditional Spanish Arabism has paid little attention to the Almoravid and Almohad periods, for it viewed the North African Berber empires as a foreign domination characterized by religious fanaticism, which brought to an end the culture, supposedly largely indigenous, which flourished in the Iberian Peninsula under the Umayyads and the *tāʾifa* kings.¹ The degree to which the indigenous

¹ A first version of this paper was presented at the colloquium *Passages. Déplacements des hommes, circulation des textes et identités dans l'Occident médiéval*, organized by J. Duclos and P. Henriot at Bordeaux University on February 2-3, 2007. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. English translation of the Spanish original of this essay

culture—Hispano-Roman and Visigoth, as well as Christian—survived in al-Andalus varies according to individual interpretation, but almost exclusive preference has been given to the study of the early centuries of Andalusī history. These centuries, considered to be an age of splendor and religious coexistence (Menocal), were more easily accepted when it came to the writing of the national history of Spain (*Al-Andalus/España*). It was thought to be more difficult to do the same with the political and cultural processes that took place under the Almoravids and the Almohads.

Naturally there were exceptions to the lack of scholarly enthusiasm for the history of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, some of which are very noteworthy, such as the studies carried out by the eponym of the *Banū Codera*, Francisco Codera y Zaidín, and later by Ambrosio Huici Miranda, whose work is becoming ever more highly valued (Marín, *La cocina*), as well as the work by Jacinto Bosch Vilá. Figures such as Ibn Quzmān, Ibn Ṭufayl, Muḥyī 'l-dīn Ibn 'Arabī or Ibn Rushd (Averroes), living under the Almoravids and the Almohads, have been the object of investigation, but generally little attention was paid to explain their lives and works within the framework of the Almoravid and Almohad political and cultural contexts. In recent years more interest has been given to this line of inquiry. There have been a growing number of studies, as shown by Volume 8.2 of the *Historia de España* Ramón Menéndez Pidal (Viguera Molins), and its accompanying bibliography, and other collected studies that have appeared subsequently (*Los almohades: Problemas y perspectivas; Averroès et l'averroïsme, XII^e-XV^e siècle*).

Mistrust of a period seen as alien and fanatical has left a legacy of general ignorance, and as a result certain striking parallels with the political and cultural processes in the Christian world of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries have gone unnoticed. It is true that the debt the prolific intellectual output during the reign of Alfonso X owes to Arabic sources has been generally recognized, with extreme points of view ranging from a radical reluctance to acknowledge the debt, to a constant harking back to Andalusī precedents, as in the case of the studies by Francisco Márquez Villanueva.² Even in the latter case, however, hardly a reference is made to the

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² See Gómez Redondo, where the presentation of the intellectual production during the times of Alfonso X obscures its indebtedness to Arabic sources. On the other hand, see Burns: "A major component of [Alfonso X's] work, indeed the indispensable tool,

Almohad context, referring rather to the “cultural” precedent of the Umayyad caliphate.

This is particularly striking because Almohad culture is ignored even when referring to the influence of Averroism, which is generally well accepted in Western Christian historiography. The disregard for the Almohad context seems to be symptomatic of the ignorance mentioned above, for the intellectual work of Averroes can only be explained within the framework of the cultural and religious policies promoted by the Almohad caliphs, as Dominique Urvoy’s scholarly work has clearly shown. It was in fact the Almohad caliphs who encouraged the development of Aristotelian philosophy, commissioning and financing the philosophical, medical and juridical work of Averroes; and this encouragement formed part of the “sapientialist” concept of the Almohad caliphate itself. It is this often-disregarded “sapientialism” that I wish to discuss, to establish its connection with the work of Alfonso X. The connection has already been made in a recent study by Ana M. Montero, in which she analyzes passages of the *General Estoria* and the *Setenario* to a work written under the patronage of the Almohad caliphs. Of particular note are the passages that describe the human effort to achieve divine knowledge through the contemplation of nature and the force of reason. The Muslim work to which these passages have obvious parallels is Ibn Ṭufayl’s *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān*, or *The Self-Taught Philosopher*. In this essay I shall explain what was involved in the political and cultural project of the Almohads and examine the parallels to Alfonso X’s political and cultural project.

The Almohad Political and Cultural Project

The Almohad political and cultural project may be outlined as follows:³

- a) A theocratic government founded by a quasi-prophetic figure, Ibn Ṭūmart, and carried on by his successors, the caliphs of the Mu’minid dynasty. The Almohad caliph is the vicar of God on earth who promotes and guarantees all knowledge.
- b) The creation of new religious and political elites, educated in the Almohad doctrine under the direct control of the caliph.

was intensive further absorption of Islamic culture by translation, adaptation, and influences” (6).

³ What follows is an extract from my forthcoming monograph *Rethinking Islam in the Muslim West: Almohad Religious and Cultural Policies*.

- c) Legislative unification, political and administrative centralization and reforms of weights and measures.
- d) The Almohad caliphs' encouragement of encyclopedic knowledge. Development of philosophy, natural sciences and magical and Kabbalistic knowledge.
- e) An interest in extending Almohad doctrine to the common people: use of the Berber language, the teaching of Arabic and the fostering of the production of educational works.

Naturally, this outline does not include the variations and alterations that these religious and cultural policies underwent during the history of the Almohad caliphate, due to long-standing resistance from the religious establishment; but the outline does reflect the principal points. I will consider each of them individually.

a) *A theocratic government founded by a quasi-prophetic figure, Ibn Tūmart, and carried on by his successors, the caliphs of the Mu'minid dynasty. The Almohad caliph is the vicar of God on earth who promotes and guarantees all knowledge.*

The doctrine relating to the Sunni or orthodox caliphate held that the caliph, the political and religious leader of the Muslim community, was the vicar of the Prophet of God. In this way, although the caliph was considered the central figure to oversee that the community followed the correct path to salvation, his role was basically limited to ensuring compliance with the Prophet Muḥammad's message, which had been set down in the *Qur'ān* and in the Tradition of the Prophet—that is, in the narration of the deeds and words of Muḥammad, the interpretation of which was entrusted to the 'ulamā', who were specialists in religious knowledge, especially of the law. Thus the legacy of the Prophet was divided between the caliph and the scholars, with the latter especially responsible for the interpretation and implementation of this legacy.

The Shi'ites, on the other hand, saw the caliph not as the vicar of the Prophet but of God himself. They attributed to him qualities that the Sunnis tended to restrict to prophets, such as supernatural knowledge, "impeccability" and the ability to perform miracles. For the Shi'ites this was possible since only a direct descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad could be a caliph: genealogy assured the transmission of a special closeness

to God or sainthood; the caliph was also *walī Allāh*, or ‘the friend of God’ (Crone).

The Almohads were not Shi‘ites in the strictest sense of the word, although their doctrine on the imamate shows influence of Shi‘ite models, such as Ismā‘ilism and the Fatimid caliphate (Fierro, “Le *mahdī*”). The origins of the Almohad movement go back to a quasi-prophetic figure, considered to be impeccable or infallible: this was the Maṣmūda Berber Ibn Tūmart, who was recognized by his fellow tribesmen, as well as by disciples coming from different Berber tribes, as the *mahdī* (García-Arenal). *Mahdī* in Arabic means ‘the rightly guided one’ and is a term that Sunni doctrine applies to an eschatological figure destined to appear at the end of time to lead the Muslim community back to the state of religious perfection that it enjoyed under the rule of the Prophet Muḥammad. Closely connected to this eschatological meaning, the term has been applied to different historical figures who claimed to be political and religious reformers. By going against the mainstream, they presented themselves as *mahdīs*, thus seeking to legitimize their break with the existing consensus; they could present a new way of doing things—always presented as a *retour aux sources* to the times of the Prophet Muḥammad—precisely because they were quasi-prophetic characters, endowed with special powers and infallibility. Ibn Tūmart died without an heir and was succeeded by one of his disciples, the Zanāta Berber ‘Abd al-Mu‘min, and all the Almohad caliphs were his descendants. ‘Abd al-Mu‘min adopted an Arabic genealogy when he took the title of caliph. On his father’s side, he claimed descent from the tribe of Qays, northern Arabs, one of the branches of which was the tribe of the Prophet, Quraysh; to another branch of the tribe belonged Khālīd b. Sinān, the only pre-Islamic prophet of Arabic origin recognized by Islam. On his mother’s side he claimed to be descended from the Prophet Muḥammad; among the Berbers, matrilineal descent was considered more important than patrilineal (Fierro, “Genealogías”). In addition to his genealogical legitimacy, ‘Abd al-Mu‘min was said to be endowed with special qualities: he had a special “light” which made him a “lamp” that illuminated the Almohads (Brett). These special qualities made him deserve God’s delegation or caliphate. His rule was assimilated to the Divine Disposition or command, *amr Allāh*, mentioned in the *Qur’ān*, so that obeying him was the same as obeying God (Fricaud, “Origine”; Vega et al., *El mensaje*). Unlike the case of the founder of the movement, Ibn Tūmart, impeccability was not one of the attributes of the

Almohad caliphs, even though the latter do appear as the final judges in all matters, including religion, since salvation depends on obedience to them. They had no rival to compete with them in determining what was right from a religious point of view (Marín, “El califa almohade”; ‘Azzāwī).

This brings us to the second point, the religious and political elites.

b) *The creation of new religious and political elites, educated in the Almohad doctrine under the direct control of the caliph.*

As already mentioned, the Sunni caliph shared religious knowledge with the ‘*ulamā*’, whose training and propagation were not his responsibility. The scholars, indeed, received their instruction as informal study, with teachers they themselves chose. Thus they developed the necessary capacity to interpret Revelation or identify models to follow, as established by previous generations of scholars. When they received a salary, it principally was paid from pious bequests and, to a lesser extent, dependent on political power (Fierro, “The Case of the Islamic West”; García Sanjuán).

The Shi’ite caliph, in contrast, was the depositary of religious knowledge received directly from God, so that under his government there was no place for ‘*ulamā*’ in the Sunni sense—that is, for scholars who through their efforts reached personal interpretations of Revelation. There were only propagandists, *du‘āt*, or missionaries charged with the transmission of the movement’s doctrine, which emanated directly from the *imām* and which he, and he alone, guaranteed (Halm).

In principle, this was the solution adopted by the Almohad caliphs not only due to the Shi’ite influence underlying the movement, but also because it solved a pressing problem: how to impose the new Almohad doctrines in the face of opposition from the existing religious elites. In fact, the adoption of the Shi’ite formula allowed the caliph to control directly the training and mission of the religious elite, whose salaries depended on him. The recruitment of young men, from inside and outside the ranks of the movement’s followers, was organized; they received specialized training according to the role that they would assume, which always included the memorization of the professions of faith attributed to Ibn Tūmart. The extraordinarily widespread diffusion of these professions of faith is evident in their early translation into Latin by Marco de Toledo (d’Alverny and Vajda). The Almohad religious elite was called *ṭalaba*, or ‘students,’ and fell into two main groups: the *ṭalaba* who accompanied the Almohad caliph on his journeys—*ṭalabat al-ḥaḍar*—and the *ṭalaba* who held different political and religious functions in the territory under Almohad control

and generally accompanied political and military dignitaries. As far as the former, which included physicians, philosophers and theologians, the caliph met with them to suggest topics of discussion, which were often related to theological and metaphysical matters (Fricaud, “*Les talaba*” and “*Le place*”).

c) *Legislative unification, political and administrative centralization and reforms of weights and measures.*

One of the first measures taken by the Almohad caliphs was to attempt to end the conflicting views that existed in the field of law. To understand this measure, it is necessary to explain how the Sunni legal system worked. The legal sources were the *Qurʾān* and the *ḥadīth*, the Tradition of the Prophet. Since the legal material contained in these sources is not exhaustive and sometimes ambiguous, the scholars specializing in law, the *fuqahāʾ*, or ‘jurists,’ interpreted legal doctrine. This interpretation implied the use of reason, subject to a series of regulatory norms that varied according to legal schools. Although there were a variety of legal schools, only four were recognized as orthodox, and each developed differing legal doctrines. This legal pluralism was accepted by Sunni Islam, in which the process of legal codification had no place in pre-modern times (Bearman, Peters and Vogel).

In Shiʿite Islam, on the other hand, pluralism is not in principle permitted, given the role of the *imām* as the source of knowledge and truth, which ensures the rightness of the doctrine at any point in time. In other words, if the Shiʿites were to take power and their perfect and infallible *imām* were to govern directly, then there could only be one correct legal doctrine: that which came from him.⁴

The Almohad system also sought to eliminate the divergence of legal opinions, to establish the truth in matters of religion and in the field of law (Fierro, “Legal Policies”). Given the tendency of the Almohad movement towards an increasingly Sunni point of view, there are only traces of any attempt on the part of the first Almohad caliphs to produce a legal “codification” that would eliminate conflicting versions and impose the “Almohad” interpretation of the revealed law. What can clearly be seen from the documentation available is that various methods were implemented to reduce the variety of differing laws. They encouraged the composition of works that collected prophetic traditions from more than one of the

⁴ Regarding the practice in the Shiʿite Fatimid caliphate, see Hamdani. On the practice of Shiʿites living in Sunni polities, see Stewart.

canonical compilations. Such prophetic traditions enjoyed a greater degree of “truth” and their legal content was therefore more reliable than that of other traditions (Fierro, “Revolución y tradición”). Since there could only be one revealed Truth, books were also encouraged to analyze the reasoning by which different opinions were reached. A work which responds to such an effort to reduce legal discrepancies is Averroes’ *Bidāyat al-muḥtaḥid wa-nihāyat al-muḥtaṣid*, meaning ‘The beginning for those who strive toward a personal judgement and the end for those who content themselves with received knowledge.’ This work brings together the different doctrines of all orthodox legal schools, not only those of the Malikite school, which had been dominant until that time in western Islam. Indications are given as to the legal proof on which the doctrines are based, so that the jurist consulting the work would receive a solid doctrinal foundation from which to make a decision. In this book of legal methodology, Averroes announced his intention to produce a second book dedicated to legal regulation, but if he ever wrote it, it has not survived. Had he done so, such a work of positive law would have served as a legal code for the Almohad territory, for let us not forget that Averroes’ intellectual output was wholly financed by the Almohad caliphs, to whose *ṭalaba* he must have belonged and whom he served as judge.⁵

In addition to these attempts at legislative unification and codification, the Almohad caliphs also carried out an extraordinary process of political and administrative centralization, proof of which is given by the numerous “letters” sent out by the Almohad chancellery (al-ʿAllaoui and Buresi) and is reflected in the Almohad army’s striking capacity for mobilization, as has recently been pointed out by Francisco García-Fitz in his study of the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa. The Almohad caliphs also undertook a profound monetary reform, which was very clearly and visibly reflected in the adoption of square coins, as well as in the establishment of new units of weight (Vega et al., “La doctrina almohade”; Fontenla).

d) *The Almohad caliphs’ encouragement of encyclopedic knowledge. Development of philosophy, natural sciences and magical and Kabbalistic knowledge.*

In the Almohad period we witness an extraordinary development in the production of works seeking not only to gather together everything that was known at the time about a particular discipline, but also to establish

⁵ On the relationship between Averroes and the Almohads, see Stroumsa; Geoffroy; and Fricaud (“Le problème”).

the general principles of those disciplines, just as Averroes had done in his legal work, the *Bidāyat*. In this way, it was clear that the object was to make available works that would cause their readers to think, by giving them the foundations on which the different sciences were built. We find works of this type in most disciplines.

In the field of Islamic religious sciences, works were written on Qur'ānic exegesis and the Tradition of the Prophet (such as, the *Tafsīr* of al-Qurṭubī, the *ḥadīth* works of Ibn al-Qaṭṭān, al-Suhaylī and Ibn al-Kharrāṭ), as well as grammar and lexicography (such as, *al-Qawānīn fī 'ilm al-'arabiyya* by al-Shalawbīnī) and *adab* (such as, the *Kitāb alif bā'* by al-Balawī).

In the realm of the "ancient sciences," works were produced on medicine (the *Kullīyyāt* of Averroes and the *Kitāb al-taysīr* of Abū Marwān Ibn Zuhr), botany (the *Kitāb al-jāmi'* of Ibn al-Bayṭar), astronomy (al-Bīṭrījī), alchemy (*Risālat shudhūr al-dhahab fī 'ilm ṣinā'at al-kīmiyā'* by Ibn Arfa' Ra'sa-hu), agriculture (*Kitāb al-muqni' fī l-filāḥa* by Ibn al-'Awwām), logic (Ibn Ṭumlūs) and philosophy (*Kanz al-'ulūm* by Ibn Tūmart al-Andalusī, in addition to Averroes' work).⁶

There is no need to expand further on the fact that the Almohad period saw a flourishing of philosophy in al-Andalus. The entire philosophical work of Averroes was composed under the patronage of the Almohad caliphs, who had encouraged him to comment on Aristotle in order to make the works more understandable; the intended audience must have been the *ṭalaba*. What is less well known is that, also under the Almohads, there was an extraordinary development of knowledge regarding magical and Kabbalistic matters. The magical treatise considered as a standard in the Islamic world, the work of the North African Aḥmad al-Būnī, was composed precisely at this time (Canteins). The correspondence between letters and reality, as well as their symbolic value, had already been developed in al-Andalus by the mystic and philosopher Ibn Masarra, whose work was brought to light in Almohad times (Guerrero and Garrido). This can be seen in the quotations included in the texts from the famous mystic Muḥyī 'l-dīn Ibn 'Arabī, whose education had also taken place in the Almohad period, and whose mystical writings likewise reflect tendencies common to Almohad intellectual culture: encyclopedic knowledge and the establishment of basic principles (Addas; Chodkiewicz). In fact, it was from the twelfth century onward, and especially in the thirteenth, that

⁶ I deal with this issue in more detail in my forthcoming book *Rethinking Islam in the Muslim West*. For books written during the Almohad period, see Fierro ("Revolución y tradición"); Forcada; Urvoy; and especially al-Manūnī.

Sufism became permanently established in the Islamic West, with hagiographic literature appearing for the first time in al-Andalus (Fierro, "Revolución y tradición" 158-160).

All of this extraordinary scientific labor (together with what we shall see in the following section) was based on the doctrine of Ibn Tūmart, founder of the Almohad movement. He composed a book which is known by the title of its first treatise, *A'azz mā yuṭlab*, or *The Most Precious Quest*, according to which the highest goal after which men should strive is knowledge, *al-'ilm* (Ibn Tūmart; Nagel; Griffel). Knowledge allows us to understand this world, and by observing and understanding what is created, man can continue to ascend towards the Creator. This possibility was proposed in one of the most representative works of the Almohad period, the *Ḥayy b. Yaqzān*, or *The Self-taught Philosopher*, of Ibn Ṭufayl (Conrad).

From the outset, the quest for knowledge characterized the Almohad movement to such an extent that the oldest source referring to the movement defines it as *madhhab fīkr*, or 'a school of (rational) thought,' showing that this quest was not restricted to memorizing and preserving what was already established, but that it centered on understanding and rational speculation (Gabrieli). It is no coincidence that the *Historia Arabum* of Don Rodrigo Ximénez de Rada presents Ibn Tūmart as an astrologer and practitioner of the physical-natural sciences. Another clear sign of the importance of the quest for knowledge is that in the Almohad period there was an extraordinary boom in the composition of bibliographical compilations, in which scholars, especially those specializing in religious science, listed the works that they had studied and with whom they had studied them. These bibliographical lists served as "certificates," vouching for the scientific credentials of those who had compiled them, and thus guaranteed that they in turn could act as teachers for succeeding generations. In this way the acquisition and transmission of knowledge acquired a greater degree of formality than in previous periods (Fórneas).⁷

e) *An interest in extending the Almohad doctrine to the common people: use of the Berber language, encouragement of the teaching of Arabic and the fostering of the production of educational works.*

The Almohad movement reflected its Berber origins through basic doctrinal texts in that language. We are still unclear as to the linguistic policy of

⁷ Makdisi has seen the educational developments of the Islamic world from the eleventh century onwards as a possible influence in the foundation of European universities.

the Almohad caliphs and the changes it underwent, but it is obvious that the writing of texts in Berber flourished under their rule. There are those who have seen this linguistic policy, catering to the needs of a non-Arabic-speaking population, as a precedent that served to justify the translation of Muslim religious texts into Romance for the use of the Mudejars (Wiegers).

On the other hand, the incorporation of the Arab tribes—the Banū Hilāl and the Banū Sulaym that had moved into North Africa from Egypt—into the Almohad ranks set in motion a process of Arabization in the central and far Maghreb, where hitherto the spread of the Arabic language had been limited (Lévy). The Almohad caliphs, who concealed their Berber origins by giving themselves an Arabic genealogy to legitimize their government, likewise fostered the Arabization of the religious elites, many of whom were recruited from the Berber-speaking population. Works were composed with a view to helping the elite learn and master the language. According to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (s.v. al-Djazūlī), this is the case of the famous *al-Muqaddima* by al-Djazūlī.

The composition of educational works was not limited to the subject of grammar. They would be found in practically all the scientific disciplines. The books summarize the principles of each discipline in verse form to make it easier to memorize. Didactic poems were thus composed to help learn Qurʾānic texts (al-Shāṭibī), the Tradition of the Prophet (al-Qurṭubī), and mathematics (Ibn al-Yāsmīn), for example (Fierro, “Teaching of the Five Pillars of Islam”).

At the personal insistence of the caliph, head of the Almohad *ṭalaba*, Almohad policies made the development and promotion of knowledge a priority. This project gradually weakened due to internal tensions between the different Almohad hierarchies as well as the opposition of the old elites who rejected the tutelage of the caliphs. The Almohad doctrine was publicly renounced by the caliph al-Maʾmūn (r. 624/1227-629/1232), and while other caliphs still continued to accept it, there soon began a process of “de-Almohadization” not only of society, but also of the sources dealing with the Almohad period.⁸

⁸ Fricaud (“*Les ṭalaba*”) was the first to use this expression of “de-Almohadization.”

Parallels between the Political and Cultural Program of the Almohads and that of King Alfonso X

The question arises as to the influence of the Almohad political and cultural program on other regions of the Islamic world. Like Averroism, was it adopted in Latin Christendom but largely ignored in Islam? It is interesting that striking parallels may be found not so much in the East as in Christian Spain. Indeed, an apt description of the first Almohad caliphs' intentions can be found in the works of Don Juan Manuel, when he comments on the intellectual and cultural mindset of his uncle, King Alfonso X. In the *Libro de la caza* he writes:

Non podria dezir ningun omne quanto bien este noble rey fizo sennalada mente en acresçentar et alunbrar el saber [No one would be able to describe how much this noble king markedly did to increase and enlighten knowledge]. (1: 520)

Then from the *Crónica abreviada*:

Ca morava en algunos logares vn anno e dos e mas e aun, segunt dizen los que viuian a la su merced, que fablauan con el los que querian e quando el queria, e ansi auia espacio de estudiar en lo quel queria fazer para si mismo, e avn para veer e esterminar las cosas de los saberes quel mandaua ordenar a los maestros e a los sabios que traya para esto en su corte. [Since he dwelt in some places a year or two or even more, according to those who lived under his favor, those who wished to speak to him did so and when he wished it, and thus he had time to study what he wished to do himself, and even see and determine the fields of knowledge that he would order to be assigned to the masters and scholars that he gathered in his court for that purpose.] (2: 575-576)

For each of the headings in the previous section, we can find the following parallels in the political and cultural project of Alfonso X:

a) *Government by a Rey Sabio—a wise king.*

Alfonso X was the son of a “saintly” king, Fernando III, and through his mother Beatrice of Swabia, descended from two emperors, Frederick I and Isaac I Komnenos, and he aspired to the *fecho del imperio*, or ‘affair of the empire’ (Estepa; Rodríguez López). As stated in the *Libro de los cien capítulos* and the *Espéculo*, the king saw himself as “the seneschal of God, who holds His place and His power on earth” and “the king holds the place of our Lord God on earth” (quoted in Maravall 225-226). Contemporary sources tell us that the king “ever since he came into this world, loved and embraced the sciences” [“siempre desde que fue en este mundo amó et allegó

a sí las ciencias”], being a “scrutiniser of sciences, a seeker of doctrines and learning” [“escodriñador de ciencias, requeridor de doctrinas e de enseñamientos”] (Rucquoi 79). The king is the “undisputed focus of knowledge and the intellectual motor of his kingdoms”, a “new Christian Solomon through whom wisdom descends from the throne to enlighten the masses, in the fashion and style of the Orient” (Menéndez y Pelayo 210, quoted in Márquez Villanueva 25).⁹ While in most of Christian Europe learning would belong to the estate of the clerics, the *Rey Sabio* claimed it for the royalty:

The declaration that all knowledge comes from God and brings man closer to God, and that kings, by the fact of being kings, have greater knowledge and greater understanding, thus confers on the royal function a clerical, if not priestly character. Not only does the king share knowledge with the members of the church, but he possesses it to a greater degree... Holiness and wisdom are... closely linked, and, although the title did not become official until the seventeenth century, Fernando III was soon to receive the title of “Saint.” (Rucquoi 81)¹⁰

With his claim, Alfonso X becomes a saint-king; he confirms his involvement in state, secular and ecclesiastic spheres. However as he does so, he also places himself above all else through a concept of the cosmos in which there is no space for the Church as a power: “in Heaven Jesus Christ rules, on earth the King who acts *in lieu* of him” (Rucquoi 82). Rucquoi continues:

God’s Lieutenant in the kingdom, above the status of cleric and layman, he shares one of Divinity’s greatest attributes, Wisdom... [T]he King of Castile, like Solomon, must communicate this wisdom. The protection and encouragement that the *Rey Sabio* gives to translations and to numerous authors, or indeed to culture in general, is explained by reference to this “mission.” (82)

Alfonso X the Wise appears as a new Solomon with a concept of the monarchy that considers the king not only to be God’s lieutenant, but also His “friend.” Also, just as Solomon praises Shulamith in the *Song of Songs*, Alfonso X celebrates the Virgin in the *Cantigas de Santa María*.

⁹ Following Cárdenas (“Alfonso X: Incest” 94), Márquez Villanueva adds: “The Wise King speaks essentially as a master who exposes or comments a text” (“El rey Sabio habla en lo esencial como un maestro que expone o comenta un texto” [25, n. 19]).

¹⁰ Jofre de Loaysa in the *Crónica de los reyes de Castilla* (finished in 1305) speaks of the *sanctissimus rex Fernandus* when he took Seville (72-73).

b) *In his court, the king surrounds himself with scholars, learned men trained in the new universities of Palencia and Salamanca.*

Outstanding among them are those who assist him in his legal enterprise. According to the *Siete Partidas* (I.1.17a): the king must attend “the council of wise, learned and loyal men, who know no greed” [“consejo de homes sabidores e entendidos e leales e sin codicia”], since to reform or amend the laws, the king “should seek the counsel of wise men and learned men of law, and that they consider well what things should be amended, and that this is done with the most virtuous men who there may be and who are from as many lands as possible, so that they are fully in agreement” [“haya su acuerdo con omes entendidos e sabidores de derecho, e que caten bien cuáles son aquellas cosas que se deben enmendar, e que esto lo faga con los más omes buenos que pudiese haber et de más tierras, porque sean mucho de un acuerdo”] (quoted by Maravall 258-259).

There are also philosophers, men of letters and translators, especially Jews. We have no record of most of the “wise men” surrounding the *Rey Sabio*, perhaps because, being “new men,” there was no time to develop a genre that would permit the preservation of their details, and we have not yet a monograph about them. There were also, of course, churchmen—although they no longer controlled the diffusion of knowledge. The *Libro del saber de astrología* praises scholars who can manipulate the forces of the stars:

Pero esto non lo fazian otros omes sinon aquellos que eran de buenos entendimientos et de sotiles ingenios et spíritos. et que fazian sus uidas. et sus fechos ordenadamientre. et limpia. assi que se acordaron los spíritos con los otros spíritos celestiales. et por esto sopieron los sanctos. et los sabios filósophos todas las cosas ciertamientre. [But this work was done only by men who possessed good understanding, subtle wit and spirit, and who conducted their lives orderly and cleanly. And thus they accorded their spirits with those of the heavenly spirits, which allowed the saints and philosophers to have a truthful knowledge of all things.] (quoted and translated in Montero 7)

It has been said that natural philosophy offered an intellectual meeting point, a safe haven where Jews, Muslims and Christians could interact and work together. An example is the translation enterprise in Alfonso's court, with Jews and Christians working side by side. The *Lucidario* of Sancho IV states: “And this ‘knowledge of natures’ is more common to all the persons and it is used by Christians, and Jews, and Muslims (Moors), and all other kinds of men in this world who want to learn something” [“E este saber

de las naturas es mas comun a todas las gentes del mundo e vsan por el christianos, e judios, e moros, e todas las otras maneras de omnes que biuen en el mundo que algo quieren aprender”] (quoted and translated in Montero 16).

Georges Duby has noted that the late medieval monarchy, as it became stronger, acquired a capacity for social creation, the fruit of which would be the formation of a specialized body of learned men, beyond the previous classifications of medieval society, so that the difference between the educated and the uneducated increased, and the former acquired ever greater social standing (Duby and Lardreau, cited in Rodríguez de la Peña 18). Alfonso X took various measures to weaken the nobility and old elites: he decreed, for example, that while there should be no low or base person in public office, neither should there be eminent people. In such posts the king should use “average men” (“hombres medianos”), with good personal qualities, of good family, and wealthy (Maravall 257-258).

c) *Alfonso X instituted a profound institutional and legislative reform, as well as a unified system of weights and measures* (O’Callaghan, “Image and Reality” and “Paths to Ruin”).

He sought to increase the dependence of the lords on their king in order to do away with the political structure of feudalism (Maravall; O’Callaghan, “Ideology of Government”). The codification carried out in works such as the *Fuero real* and *Siete partidas* aimed at putting an end to the legal diversity of the territories under his rule (Maravall 242-243). The king is seen not only as *iudex*, but as legislator (Maravall 230). According to the *Espéculo*, the Goths united the law in Hispania, but the written code was lost and the laws forgotten (cited in Fernández-Ordóñez and Martín 72). However, various groups retained remnants of the code, with the result that each city tried to reassemble the laws individually, producing the variety of local systems (*fueros*), based on the older system: “Es digno de observarse que para el rey Alfonso la razón de la validez de los fueros se halla en ser fragmentos de un anterior Derecho general de todo el reino” [“It is worth noting that for King Alfonso the validity of the *fueros* lies in that they are fragments of the kingdom’s earlier general law”] (Maravall 241, n. 89). The *Rey Sabio*’s legal work is based on Roman Law, but there is also a clear influence of Aristotelianism; from this he adapts the concept of political life determined by “nature,” the response to which is the high level of autonomy and secularization of the Alfonsine political order. This possibility

of appealing to the “nature” of things, as a rational field of investigation, was the great innovation of the period: “What the twelfth century lacked in order to enable it to recognize concrete reality beneath a world of symbols was the concept of nature, endowed with its own internal structure, albeit weakly... [T]he thirteenth century was indebted to Aristotelian physics” (Gilson 343, quoted by Maravall 215, n. 7).

d) *The direct involvement of the king in cultural policies, with the objective of encyclopedic knowledge.*

Rucquoi has noted that the twelfth-century renaissance was characterized “by an intense effort to ‘codify’ knowledge, an urgent need to unify all the sources known at the time” (78). The output of works coming from the royal *scriptorium* between the years 1250 and 1280 included books of history, law, religion, science and entertainment. In these books, Alfonso X, a man in search of science, rescues and conserves knowledge, signaling him as the heir to and depository of the science and knowledge from the past (Montero 4). In his study of the prologues of Alfonso’s scientific works, Roberto J. González-Casanovas points out that “through them all he conveys the same message of the quest for the best and most complete knowledge to place in the service of the kingdom in order to effect the greatest good” (113). The Alfonsine histories, such as the *General Estoria*, portray, above all, civilizing leaders: wise men, men of law and astronomers, such as Jupiter, Hercules, Perseus, Abraham and Moses. The king is seen as belonging to a long tradition of governors who were also scholars. The king is the intellectual and spiritual guide of his realm (Montero 4, n. 13, citing Salvador Martínez 11; Rico 113-114; Cárdenas, “Alfonso X’s Appropriation”). According to the testimony of Don Juan Manuel in the *Libro de la caza* (1: 519), the *Rey Sabio* also promoted Kabbalistic studies, the influence of which can be seen in works like the *Setenario* (see also Alfonso X 25, 39-45).

e) *Alfonso X’s purpose was to educate his people.*

Alfonso promoted the vernacular language through his written work. Castilian Spanish became the norm in Alfonsine documents, following the precedent set by his father, Fernando III, who had used the vernacular in documents dated 1214 (Márquez Villanueva 18-19). The thirteenth century has been called the century of didactic encyclopedism. During the reign of Fernando III, letters and knowledge were fundamental in “the

literary phenomenon known as the *mester de clerecía*, in which certain ‘intellectuals’ educated under the protection of the University of Palencia, wrote learned and didactic works aimed at the education of the general public” (Rucquoi 79-80). The *mester de clerecía* encompasses works such as the *Libro de Alexandre* which, together with the historical works of Jiménez de Rada and Lucas de Tuy, are, above all, works “for the education of princes,” reflecting the importance of knowledge in the broadest sense (Rucquoi 83; Rodríguez de la Peña 33).

The cultural synthesis created by Alfonso X and his collaborators was denounced by his son and heir, Sancho IV, in the 1290s. Earlier, in 1279, the Castilian bishops had sent Pope Nicholas III (1277-1280) a list of complaints against the king’s numerous violations of ecclesiastical rights. Among the allegations was that of the presence of a group of natural philosophers in Alfonso’s court: men who denied the existence of God and preferred to concern themselves with the physical rather than the spiritual world. Two years earlier, Bishop Tempier had condemned 219 propositions that were being taught at the University of Paris, although Peter Linehan believes that, in truth, what concerned the Spanish bishops was not doctrine, but that their traditional role as royal counselors had been usurped by natural philosophers (Montero 7-8; Linehan 435-436).¹¹ Shortly thereafter, the rumor of the “blasphemy of Alfonso X” circulated. It mentioned that the king had reputedly said that if he had been present at the time of creation, he would have given advice on how better to organize the universe: “Don Alfonso being in Seville said publicly that if he had been with God when He created the world, he would have altered many things so that they would be better than they were” [“don Alfonso estando en Seuilla dixo en plaça que si el fuera con Dios quando fazia el mundo que muchas cosas emendara en que se fiziera mejor que lo que se fizo”] (found in ms U of the *Crónica general* 1344, Biblioteca del Marqués de Heredia Spínola, Madrid [ant. Biblioteca de Francisco Zabálburu], quoted by Ruiz 82, n. 23; specific passage above also quoted by Funes 61 citing Ruiz; see also Cárdenas, “Towards an Understanding” 81). This myth represents the discontent with Alfonso’s cultural plan, in particular with certain features such as the promotion of astrology, the use of the vernacular or its secular tendencies. Sancho’s followers evoked the legend to legitimize their

¹¹ On the monarchy and its complex relationships with the Church, see Nieto Soria (*Iglesia y poder real en Castilla* and *Fundamentos ideológicos del poder real en Castilla*).

rebellion, which was supported by the majority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy (Salvador Martínez 486). In 1293, Sancho IV commissioned the writing of the *Lucidario*. The work defines a cultural and religious orthodoxy, in which theology and astrology should be kept segregated (Montero 8-10). All this accompanied the disappearance or mutilation of many Alfonsine manuscripts (Domínguez Rodríguez 201). After Sancho IV's reign there is no record of an author of royal lineage, with the exception of Don Juan Manuel (Rucquoi 84).

Conclusion

Intellectual influences of Muslim on Christian culture, and the important role played by Jews as mediators, are beyond doubt. The works of authors who lived during the Almohad period, such as al-Bīṭrūjī and Averroes, were translated at a very early stage, a clear sign that the Christian world admitted the superiority of the Muslims in various branches of knowledge, such as philosophy or astronomy. This is a recognized fact, although we may need reminding of it from time to time (see Alain de Libera). There is still much to study with regard to the translation of religious texts, such as the professions of faith of Ibn Tūmart, which are generally understood to have been composed to provoke religious controversy, but for which there may have been other determining factors. More attention should be paid to direct contact, such as that represented by members of both the Christian and Muslim elites who moved between the courts of the Christian kings and that of the Almohad caliph, as did Don Álvaro Pérez de Castro and his family.

Historian Marshall Hodgson's book, *The Venture of Islam*, published in the 1970s, but with little impact outside the Anglo-Saxon—or, to be more precise, American—world, coined the term “Islamicate” to refer to a common culture: not restricted to the Islamic religion, for it also embraced Jews and Christians within the Islamic sphere of influence. In this Islamicate world, ideas, doctrines, narratives, etc., existed in different religious contexts, being adapted to the specific needs of each but maintaining an essential similarity (Hodgson; Bulliet). Although there are many scholars who firmly situate the life and times of Alfonso X the Wise within this Islamicate world, there are still many who resist the idea. In general, as indicated above, there is a reluctant, or inevitable, admission of the undeniable fact that many of the Alfonsine works were translations from the

Arabic; but there is no inclination to acknowledge the wider implications that this fact may have. This is in spite of the fact that almost all the scholars dealing with Alfonso X at some point express their surprise or amazement at many of his cultural and religious policies. However, if Alfonso's works are looked at from the Islamic point of view, most of his policies are not surprising. Even a scholar such as Márquez Villanueva, who may be categorized as espousing the opposite point of view, has been unable to articulate in proper context this Arab-Islamic influence, in favor of which he argued for so long. He has been unable to recreate a convincing framework of political and religious culture within the Islamic world to correspond, in general terms, to that developed by Alfonso X. Through study of the relationship between Alfonso X and the specific Almohad context, we understand the supremacy of knowledge as a criterion of political, social or moral hierarchization (the definition of "sapientialism" as proposed by Rodríguez de la Peña) and an instrument to legitimize the renewal of society, a radical political transformation.

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